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Capricious pathways – a comparative analysis of local identity building in border regions. A case study of Polands Western and Eastern border

Martin Barthel

Prologue – Life in two border regions

- 1 Krzysztof is leaving every morning at 8:00 the German border town Löcknitz. At that time his children are already at the local school. His wife will take the train to Szczecin, since her work starts later. On his way across the border Krzysztof is in the middle of a steady stream of commuters like him. Things got better after Poland joined Schengen, since no control jeopardizes his commute. Although Szczecin is just 30 kilometers away, Krzysztof and his family moved to Germany, as the real estate prices in the Polish suburbs became too high (Malkowska *et al.*, 2016). For German towns like Löcknitz or Gartz, which had been faced with declining population, the cross-border suburbanization came as a savior and for commuters like Krzysztof, the border in its physical form is becoming less relevant for their everyday life and “... sleeping abroad but work at home” became convenient (Balogh, 2013).
- 2 At the same time of day, Olga has already left her home in the Ukrainian city Lviv. In order to supplement her small pension, she is heading towards the border crossing of Medyka, where she will spend the day working as a “mrowka” (ant). She will buy vodka and cigarettes and take them to Poland, where she will sell them and buy products to be sold in Ukraine. Her profit depends on the crossings she can manage in a day (Byrska-Szklarczyk, 2012). Until 2004 the border was easy to cross, but since then things have gotten worse. Waiting lines on the border have increased and the controls

have become more rigid. Crossing the border is for her a daily insecurity. In the 90s she would never have thought that the border would become ever that divisive again (Barthel, 2016).

- 3 These two characters and their everyday routines are a typical representation of borderlanders, based on the findings of many scholars (Scott, 2015).
- 4 The article will provide a brief overview of the development of both border regions since 1989 and examine the impact of the border on the everyday life. A key question of the research was how the border is used by the local borderlanders and which impact this has on the perception of the other. The shaping and re-shaping of borders became a part of the political realities in Eastern Europe after the Second World War. While the exchange of population and territory had been the bitter reality, the postwar socialist societies became determined by tabooing the drawing of the border. Heavy guarded and securitized, borders served as ideological symbols of socialist friendship (Barthel, 2016, p. 207).
- 5 Between 1945 and 1947 the German-Polish and the Polish-Ukrainian border regions witnessed likewise the re-settlement of huge parts of the population, alienating the border regions, and creating a local society with broken identity. With the end of the Cold War and the EU enlargement a re-definition of the understanding of identity and borders became necessary. The border with Germany became an internal EU border, facilitating free cross-border mobility and deregulation. The border with Ukraine became part of the heavy controlled EU external border with a visa regime, leading to a gradual closure of the border (Stoklosa, 2012).
- 6 Thus, the article strives to highlight the duality of connected and disconnected border regions in Europe.
- 7 The analysis is based on desktop-research, literature review and fieldwork with interviews in the German-Polish border region of Szczecin and the Ukrainian-Polish border town Przemyśl.

Narrating the border – regional discourses on the border

- 8 In order to understand the developing paths of the two border regions, it is insightful to analyze the local discourses on the border after 1989, which until today determine similarities and differences in cross-border interaction.
- 9 The relations at the German-Polish border had not just been shaped by the Post-War history but by the perceptions of especially the early 80s. The Poles perceived the GDR mainly through the relatively good economic situation and the Germans appreciated the relative freedom in Poland. This notion was skeptically rejected by the local authorities. From 1980 on, the SED used openly anti-Polish resentments in the local media, condemning especially the rise of Solidarność. This resulted in the closure of the border and the establishment of a strict visa regime (Keck-Szajbel, 2013). The isolation was revoked in the wake of the German reunification. However the local perceptions had been two folded – while the local Poles feared that the border and their life in the former German areas could become questioned again, the local Polish realized pragmatically the chances of neighboring a strong economy in the European Community (Hinrichsen, 2015).

- 10 The Germans felt as well threatened by opening the border, due to the fear of a rise of border related crime and corruption, causing an exaggerated impact (Beurskens *et al.*, 2015).
- 11 Still, the open border enabled a new degree of interaction, Poles started to work in Germany, while Germans went to Poland to buy cigarettes, petrol and alcohol. The citizens of Szczecin discovered in the late 90s the German heritage of the city, which had been suppressed during the communist times, resulting in a number of novels and literature which contributed to a new regional identity. Scholars like Musekamp described it as an acquisition of identity, where the memory of the German grandparents' became preserved by the Polish grandchildren (Musekamp, 2013).
- 12 Although negative resentment and attacks of German Nazis on Poles regularly fired heat in the local media (Ruf, Sundermeyer, 2009), the broad discourse went in favor of cooperation and connectivity (Kinder *et al.*, 2014).
- 13 Nowadays even German extreme rights from the Freie Pommern movement in Mecklenburg coordinate with "patriotic football fans" of Szczecin their protest against the influx of refugees into the cross-border region (Sakson, 2017).
- 14 The Euroregion Pomerania, consisting of the border region of Germany, Poland and Sweden, provided since 1995 a solid base for institutionalized cooperation (Zielińska, Koszyk-Białobrzaska, 2009). With the accession of Poland to the EU in 2004 and the Schengen acquis in 2007, the border started to fade in the everyday life and enabled, combined with the rising housing prices in Szczecin, a new transnational suburban area on the German side.
- 15 Poles moved in empty houses and apartments in German towns like Löcknitz or Gartz, commuting daily towards work in Poland. Situated in the German economic and spatial periphery, the regional planning strategies ignored for a long time the positive metropolitan effects and concentrated on scenarios of shrinking and decline (Lis, 2013).
- 16 The question on how the new suburbanization could be integrated in spatial planning had been soon raised in the region. As the German side faced ignorance from their regional planners, the Polish communes were even confronted with resistance from their planning authorities. Poland did not favor the establishment of a transnational planning structure, while in Germany there was no interest. Thus, the regional cooperation was initiated through personal local contacts and funded by cross-border programs of the EU, establishing a de-facto bottom-up shadow planning. Still, the networks depended on individuals, resulting in fragility and limited impact. With the revision of the national planning policies and the urge to create metropolitan regions in the frame of the European spatial planning, Szczecin went ahead and initiated together with its Polish neighbor communes the Association of the Szczecin Metropolitan Area (Stowarzyszenie Szczecińskiego Obszaru Metropolitalnego) in 2009 (Małachowski, 2013).
- 17 The degree of integration and connectivity was still too less for the German communes. Driven by the major, Gartz strived to become an associated member of the Polish planning region, which was rejected by the German State¹. However the bottom-up regional initiatives resulted in the German-Polish development concept for the trans-border metropolitan region Szczecin, where the regional planning authorities from Germany (the Länder Mecklenburg-Vorpommern and Brandenburg) and those from Poland (the Voivodeship and the city and powiat of Szczecin) implemented for the first

time a trans-national regional development plan for a common cross-border metropolis (MIR, 2014).

- 18 The ongoing spatial integration was supported through the cohesive policies of the EU, enabling the local transnational cooperation even against resistance from the nation States. Scholars like Lis (2014) claimed that the cross-border area would be turned into a laboratory for everyday life, language, education, work and leisure – providing a space of ideas of how Poles and Germans can develop the region together and test new forms of European identity.
- 19 The Polish-Ukrainian border was in 1991 in a similar setting. The drawing of the border was a product of the Second World War, resulting in forceful population exchange and civil war. The creation of the border had been tabooed by the communist regime, which led to an atmosphere of conspiracy and rumors, considering the past (Zhurzhenko, 2014).
- 20 With the independence of Ukraine, the border became wide open and for the first time since 1945 interaction across the border became possible. Despite the difficult past, Poland as a nation had vivid interests in the Europeanization of Ukraine. Since 1995 Warsaw strived for deeper cooperation with Kiev, which led to a liberal border regime, opening the border wide (Wolczuk, 2008).
- 21 However, the open border created a series of strong local nationalistic replies in Przemyśl (Buzalka, 2008). Exploiting the perceived fear of “Ukrainisation” of the town the former vice-voivod Stanisław Żółkiewicz became the most important single actor, favoring local discourses on national uniformity (Kowal, 2018). When in 1991 the Catholic Church planned to return the Carmelite Church in Przemyśl to the Ukrainian Church, his local committee for defending the Poles in Przemyśl was formed and occupied the church even against the will of the Vatican. In 1993 he organized a movement against the accession of Przemyśl to the Euroregion Carpathia (Hann, 2000, p. 101) and blocked in 1995 with his “society of the defenders of the memory of the Eagle of Przemyśl”² the plans to hold a festival of the Ukrainian minority in Przemyśl, narrating the festival as an attempt of a re-Ukrainisation of the region (Hobal, 2008).
- 22 Despite the nationalistic activities, which dominated headlines, the cross-border cooperation on institutional level and between civil society groups increased. Administrative employees, NGOs and local business realized that the border forms a resource for regional development. The national symbolic function of the border became less relevant and local elites embraced narratives on cooperation. Consequently in 2007 the town recognized in the “*Strategia sukcesu*” (Strategy for success) the border as the key resource for future structural development (Miasta Przemysl, 2014).
- 23 Local historic identity patterns like “*Galicja*” or “*Ziemia przemyska*” became more relevant than the nationalistic patterns “*Podkarpackie*” or “*Kresy*” (Barthel, 2017). The interviews which the author conducted in his field work found a certain identification with “living at the border” and a regional identity in the making. Based on the model of local transborder cooperation developed by Bürkner and Mathiessen (2001) trans-national oriented circles are striving to institutionalize the border for cooperation and development of the region.
- 24 The ethnic minorities have a key role for cross-border relation since the Polish minority in Ukraine is the natural partner for many local NGOs. The Ukrainian

minority in Poland is acting trans-nationally, but does not feel particularly integrated and there is the notion that the cooperation with Polish institutions increase, the further away from Przemyśl it is (Barthel, 2016, p. 209).

- 25 An important transnational catalyst are the bazaars, which became the prime space for cross-border personal contacts (Barthel, 2010). The traders, who are most dependent on the border, sense a feeling of otherness and are strong advocates of a border identity (Polese, 2012, p. 22). Alas the difficult past has a negative effect on the collaboration, and mechanisms that Paasi (1995) describes as *healing the border* can be observed.
- 26 The border takes for each generation a different symbolic meaning. While the older generation holds on to imagined or real wounds of history, the younger is more relaxed, as for them the border has always been there and they have become accustomed to its open character (Kennard, 2004).
- 27 Both regions, despite being at the internal and external border of the EU, share a series of common features. The impact of individual actors on the cross-border interaction is immense and a sense of otherness and of being “left-behind” can be witnessed, fed by a “borderlanders identity”, in the making, as described by Martinez (1994), supported through cohesive EU policies. The border is used as a local resource. While in Przemyśl locals engage in various forms of border trade, Szczecin is aspiring to create a wider trans-national cross-border metropolitan area, each helping to foster local development.
- 28 The main difference is the connectivity across the border. While the divide faded in the German-Polish region, enabling cross-border commuting and rethinking the border area as a bi-national laboratory of ideas, the Polish-Ukrainian border region perceives the border as a filter or an obstacle. Alas, the language barrier is lower, the interaction is mostly limited to commercial activities and for the locals the border is the only peculiarity of the town. Therefore, they favor an open border but are afraid of its disappearing since in their narrative it will turn the area into “just another” periphery, deployed from any development perspective.

Otherness – using the border as a local resource – the impact on the border regions

- 29 In regard of Martinez (1994) and O’Dowd *et al.* (2004) a sign for otherness is when the border is used as a local resource.
- 30 As a resource the border is determining the local everyday lives and influences the individual social-economic strategies of the borderlanders. The border is charged with personal and local symbolism, which tends to differ from the narratives of the national State. The gap between national and local narratives might lead to a notion of feeling left-behind, which is favoring the creation of a regional identity. As discussed both border regions have this notion, manifesting itself in diverging regional narratives of the border, both centered around exploiting the border.
- 31 Przemyśl benefits foremost from border trade. The city is often described as the most important “inland harbor” of Poland, underlining the hub function of the Medyka crossing point for the traffic between Ukraine and the EU and as a nucleus for a cluster for trade, transit and logistic firms (Voznyak, 2000). The region is increasingly profiting

from the evolution of border trade – facilitating a process of professionalization and legalization since the opening the border in 1991. The first border trade activities at the Polish-Soviet border though started already in the late 80s. During organised trips individuals bought and sold products which were either cheaper or not available, limited to the content of a suitcase, referred to as “suitcase trade” (Stokłosa, 2013).

- 32 After 1991, due to the liberal border regime and the economic impact of the economic transformation, smuggling and the “ant trade”³ became a legitimate way of substituting the individual economic situation. Borderlanders used the price differences to buy alcohol and cigarettes on the Ukrainian side, sell them on the Polish and return with groceries to Ukraine (Byrska-Szklarczyk, 2012, p. 99).
- 33 The ant trade resulted in the establishing of bazars, where former ants bought stands and started to sell clothes and groceries to Ukrainians. In 2004 the bazars covered 50% of the retail areas in the town (Barthel, 2010, p. 145).
- 34 In an interview with the author, the regional chamber of commerce stated that the bazars had been the nucleus for the development of bigger trade companies specialized in trade with Ukraine. Nowadays the ant trade, the bazars and the SMEs exist in parallel. In the years after 2006 due to the increasing cross-border shopping and the proximity to Lviv, international companies opened outlets in Przemyśl. Retail chains like Tesco, Carrefour, Mediamarkt and Castorama settled on the road to Medyka and the huge shopping mall “*Galeria Sanowa*”, containing many big cloth retailers, opened. The products and services are oriented towards Ukrainian customers and compete directly with the bazars, resulting in a decline of their importance for the local economy. The SMEs cluster, an influx of additional work places due to the retail chains and permanent substitution of transformation disadvantages through ant trade are stimulated by the border. The trade is mostly facilitated through the border crossing point in Medyka. In 2012 roughly 4,5 million people crossed the border, spending in average 700 Zloty per person in the region (Mrozek, 2015).
- 35 The evolution of trade is accompanied by a changing perception of the neighbor. While Poles felt superior to the mainly Ukrainian ants, they met in the bazars as equal traders. In the huge supermarkets, the role changed. Ukrainians are customers which are served by Polish employees, resulting in a re-definition of the neighbor, consequently in a similar shock as the Germans in the Szczecin region experienced.
- 36 At the German-Polish border political and everyday feelings of superiority from Germans over Poles prevailed although the Germans felt helplessness and fatalism regarding the future development (Bürkner, 2015). In Poland, the accession to the EU fed political and everyday attitudes displaying pragmatism and optimism. After joining Schengen, the rising housing vacancies in Germany coupled with a massive demand in Poland resulted in cross-border commuting, bringing the Polish middle class with its optimistic everyday culture to the new German suburbs⁴.
- 37 The process was enhanced by pull factors like cheaper housing costs, the good infrastructure, the existence of German-Polish institutions, schools and kindergarten, and nonetheless the positive attitude of local institutions⁵.
- 38 The cohesive policies of the European Union, which enabled the processes of de-bordering, caused the new, unexpected form of migration which turned the border into a local resource for regional development (Jańczak, 2017).

- 39 The construction of this new cross-border urban agglomeration had been ignored by German planners or opposed by Polish regional plans (Tölle, 2013). The borderlanders perceived the ignorance/resistance as a negative impact on the regional development. In local debates “Schwerin” or “Warsaw” are often blamed for not understanding local needs – uniting both sides in a notion of feeling left behind (Barthel M., Barthel E., 2018).

Commonalities and differences – how the border created two different regions

- 40 In this rather comprehensive overview of the everyday life in both border regions, a couple of similar development features are visible.
- 41 In both regions, the border was a result of the Second World War, connected with forceful repatriation of major parts of the population. The forceful creation of the border and the re-settling alienated the neighbors and due to the tabooing of the past, the scars of history are influencing the cross-border interaction until today (Sternberg, 2017).
- 42 Still, in both regions the border is an everyday resource for its inhabitants. While at the German-Polish border borderlanders are exploiting the differences in prices to buy property on the other side, the border is facilitated at the Polish-Ukrainian region for trade and income substitution (Bruns, Miggelbrink, 2011). The administrations in both regions realized the role of the border as a regional resource for development. Przemyśl is exploiting the cross-border trade and the proximity to Ukraine to attract investments and tourists (Brym, 2013), Szczecin and the German suburbs seek to create a transnational metropolitan region. Communes like Löcknitz and Gartz are aware that the proximity to Szczecin and the creation of a cross-border suburbia is their only chance for local development and are securing their infrastructure and relevance (Kamola-Cieślík, 2015).
- 43 The cross-border interaction is driven by single individual actors like majors, activists or businesses, who influence the local transnational relation positively or negatively. While the cooperation in Szczecin became more institutionalized and hardly reversible, the situation in Przemyśl is more fluid and under threat from national oriented circles.
- 44 A common feature is finally a certain sense of otherness, which Martinez (1994) used to indicate as a first step towards a regional identity. The feeling of otherness is closely connected to the everyday life at the border. Both regions feel left behind from the capital: Szczecin due to its struggle to let the trans-border metropolitan region being recognized, and Przemyśl partly due to the peripheralization of the town after the loss of the voivodship function in 1999 and partly due to the changing border regime, influencing directly the economic situation of borderlanders (Aring, 2017). However, the national identity is more relevant than the regional identity, preventing until today the feeling of separateness.
- 45 The most crucial difference and perhaps the most important factor for the success of the German-Polish border regions is the openness and connectivity across the border. As a direct result of the cohesive policies of the EU borders between member States are becoming less relevant. The process is increasing the connectivity and influencing the local everyday life. Connectivity is becoming a crucial resource for the regions –

enabling the creation of a transnational contact zone which can benefit economically from being at the intersection between two States (Świątek, 2019).

- 46 The Polish-Ukrainian border region witnessed the negative impact of EU policies. Because of Poland's accession to Schengen, the region is located at the external EU border. The divide became highly securitized and due to the visa regime, the bureaucratic hurdles rose. The increasing dis-connectivity had been perceived by the locals as a threat to the border trade and their way of living. On both sides protests occurred and the feeling of being left behind increased. The EU policies had been understood as negatively (Byrska-Szklarczyk, 2016, p. 97).
- 47 Alas national discourses favor control and dis-connectivity the local discourse tend towards connectivity. This difference in understanding chess-border interaction is feeding a regional identity in the making (Smutek, Łonyszyn, 2016).
- 48 The regional resistance towards the "new walls and fences", can be sensed at other border regions. In places like the Öresund region or at the German-Austrian border, where communes face increasing dis-connectivity, lobby against controls, and fences, this dis-connectivity has a negative impact on the way of living (Khanna, 2016).
- 49 A sustainable border policy should reflect the interest of the borderlanders, since those regions will be turned into socio-economic peripheries again when policies towards dis-connectivity prevail.

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NOTES

1. Interview by the author, see as well https://www.deutschlandfunk.de/gartz-in-der-uckermark-nachbarschaftshilfe-aus-polen.862.de.html?dram:article_id=448823 (retrieved 3.10.2019).
2. Stowarzyszenia Obroncow Pamięci Orląt Przemyskich.
3. Referred to as Mrowki.
4. as above.
5. as above.

ABSTRACTS

The shaping and re-shaping of borders became a characteristic for the political development in Central-Eastern Europe after the Second World War. While the exchange of population and territory had been the bitter reality, post-war socialist societies were shaped by a tabooing of public debates on the topics. Borders became heavily guarded and securitised lines, serving as ideological symbols of socialist friendship. With the end of the Cold War and EU accession a re-definition of the understanding of identity and borders became necessary. This contribution provides a comparative analysis between German-Polish and Polish-Ukrainian border regions, stressing on the similarities and differences in the everyday life of borderlanders. The article highlights regional identity building and investigates how identities are shaped. In the conclusions the role of the border as a resource for local economic development and transnational co-operation is discussed. The paper is based on a PhD research project. The fieldwork was done in the border towns of Frankfurt (Oder) and Słubice at the German-Polish border and the border city Przemyśl at the Polish-Ukrainian border.

Le dessin de nouvelles frontières a été une caractéristique des développements politiques en Europe centre-orientale après la Seconde Guerre mondiale. Alors que les changements territoriaux et les échanges de population ont été vécus comme des réalités amères, les sociétés socialistes de l'après-guerre ont entretenu un tabou quant au débat public sur ces questions. Les frontières de cette région sont devenues des lignes fortement gardées et sécurisées, même si elles étaient présentées comme des symboles idéologiques de l'amitié socialiste. Avec la fin de la guerre froide et l'accession de la plupart de ces pays à l'Union européenne, une nouvelle compréhension des identités et des frontières s'est imposée. Cet article livre une analyse comparée des régions frontalières de la Pologne avec l'Allemagne d'une part, avec l'Ukraine de l'autre, en mettant en évidence les similarités et les différences dans la vie quotidienne des populations frontalières. L'article éclaire la construction des identités régionales frontalières. En conclusion, il examine le rôle de la frontière en tant que ressource pour le développement économique local et les formes de la coopération transfrontalière. L'article est basé sur un projet de recherche doctoral, pour lequel les terrains de recherche ont été les villes frontalières de Francfort/Oder et de Słubice sur la frontière germano-polonaise, et la ville frontalière de Przemyśl proche de la frontière ukrainienne.

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Mots-clés: identités trans-régionales, construction d'identité, régions frontalières, villes frontalières, coopération régionale transfrontalière, frontière germano-polonaise, frontière polono-ukrainienne

Keywords: transregional identities, identity building, border regions, border cities, local and regional cross-border cooperation, German-Polish border, Polish-Ukrainian border

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